

National Association of State Boards of Education

→ Developing State and District Parent Engagement Policies

By Allison Sloane

Schools provide many services that aid children's development, well-being, and academic success. Key providers include mental health agencies, social workers, school counselors and nurses, as well as school officials and other employees. Yet quite possibly the most important component of these services—often overlooked—is the parent.

Regardless of family income or background, students whose parents are involved in their schooling are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school.

When parents are involved at school, the performance of all the children at school, not just their own, tends to improve. The more comprehensive and well planned the partnership between school and home, the higher the student achievement.¹

Sociologist Joyce L. Epstein has argued that school, family, and community are important spheres of influence on children's development and that a child's educational development is significantly enhanced when these three environments work collaboratively toward shared goals.² Education researcher John Hattie found that parental engagement in a child's education has a consistent effect size of 0.50 on student achievement (figure 1).³ This effect represents more than a year's worth of growth and more impact than

time on task, tutoring systems, study skills, or even early-years interventions.

Intentional inclusion of parental voice in decision making must start with well-written policy at both the state and local levels. State boards of education should create or improve policies requiring school districts to give all parents opportunities to receive training, influence school policy, improve student achievement, and be involved in curriculum, activities, and school functions. Such policies must take into consideration that the term "parent" encompasses different people in a child's life, as grandparents, aunts, uncles, foster parents, and even older siblings often serve in the role of parent.

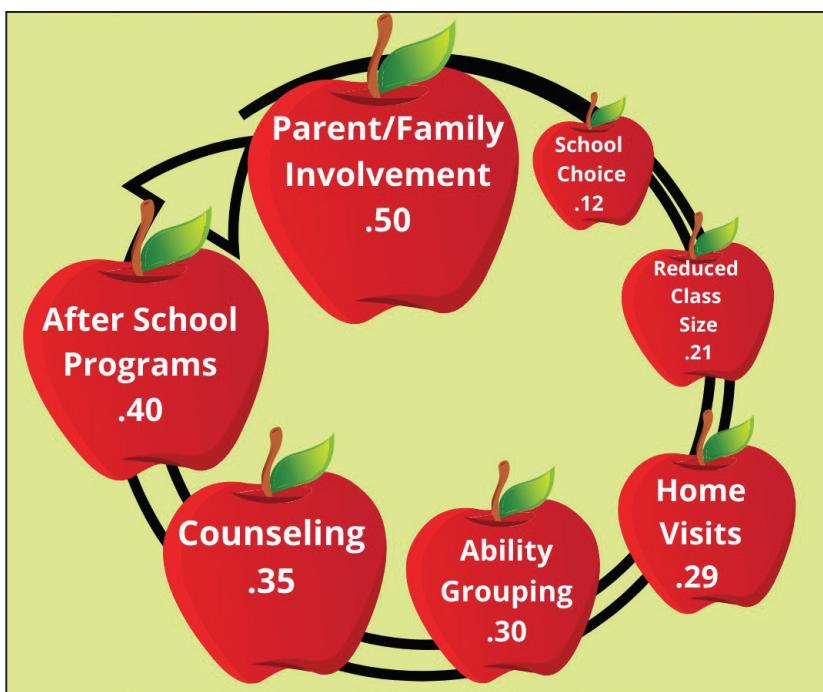
OBSTACLES TO ENGAGEMENT

Beliefs and perceptions as well as income level, work responsibilities, and other identifying factors are strong indicators of how involved parents are willing to be in their child's school. Sometimes parental involvement is directly correlated to constraints due to work schedules, being a single parent, or being non-English speaking. These barriers can and should be addressed through well-implemented parent engagement policy.⁴

Especially after elementary school, parents often express a feeling of being unwanted or unneeded. Parents of black and brown students may perceive racism and biases in schools, especially when there is little communication with them. And educators often perceive these parents as being less interested in the educational success of their children, when in fact the parents feel unwelcome.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act requires parental involvement in policy-making (Sec. 1118, Title I Part A). All Title I schools must have policy that addresses parental involvement in school programs, evaluations of the effectiveness of those programs, school activities, and annual meetings, and the schools must offer literacy and parenting trainings, childcare for parents to reduce barriers to involvement, and frequent

Figure 1. Impacts on Student Achievement (effect sizes)



Source: John Hattie, *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008).

communications between school and home.

More often than not, schools and districts fulfill only the absolute minimum necessary to meet these requirements. Parents often serve as elected officials on local boards of education and school-based decision-making councils but are not involved in the day-to-day happenings within the school. Some parents get involved with the parent teacher organizations, but this often is a small percentage of the population and subsides after elementary school.

STATES WITH PARENT ENGAGEMENT POLICIES

Currently 39 states have parent or family engagement policies, and at least 5 states have advisory councils with the power to influence policy.⁵ Ohio has a parent engagement policy and a parent engagement coordinator, who oversees the implementation of the state policy. That policy requires each school district to implement a policy that includes parents in the development of the policy, parents involved in student achievement, education/training for parents, an integration of other community and school programs, annual evaluation of effectiveness of the policy, parent compacts, parent responsibilities, and frequent communications.

Delaware prioritizes both effective school-family communication and making explicit the responsibilities of families and public schools to educate students. The Delaware legislature created the Parents Declaration of Responsibilities to highlight these duties and to assist families in meeting their responsibilities.

Texas has produced a training manual, "Parent Involvement in Every School," for improving parental involvement. Under Michigan law, school districts are encouraged to create voluntary contracts between educators and families.

The Kentucky Board of Education, where I serve as an ex officio member, has the Commissioner's Parent Advisory Council to advise it. The members in 2006 recommended that Kentucky become the first state to adopt comprehensive school performance descriptors for family and community involvement focused on improving student achievement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE BOARDS

All state boards should develop and implement a family or parent engagement policy. Those that already have one should revisit and reevaluate their policy to include these elements at a minimum:

- a statutory definition of effective parent or family engagement that identifies the various people who may play the role of parent
- parent advisory councils
- access to families to ensure attendance and involvement of those parents with conflicting schedules
- a way to hold districts accountable for parent/family engagement
- an increase in effective, frequent communications between school and home that also include grade-level expectations, core content requirements, and classroom and school procedures.
- training opportunities for parents on such things as school policy, assessments, homework assistance, literacy, and parenting skills
- procedures for parent objections and reconciliation
- access to programs, supports, and community services for students and parents
- opportunities for parents to participate in classroom activities and classroom instruction
- procedures for volunteers
- recognition of diversity in culture, ethnicity, and race and how to embrace those differences
- development of surveys to ensure all voices are heard and valued
- parental compacts, bill of rights, and/or code of responsibilities
- a schedule of frequent parent conferences⁶

Over the last several months, education has changed drastically all over the country. Before COVID and virtual learning, only 33 percent of parents experienced frequent contact and communications with their children's teachers.⁷ Since school building closures in 2020, 95 percent of those parents now experience frequent communications

and contacts with their children's teachers. Seventy-one percent of those parents say they have a deeper understanding of the work teachers and schools do daily. This is a significant turn in the right direction, because parents who lack an understanding of what their children should know and be able to do at each grade level are less likely to be able to engage effectively with educators to promote their children's learning.

According to a 2020 Learning Heroes survey, 49 percent of teachers believe actively involved parents have the most impact on student success. This shift in parental involvement and educator outreach makes this the perfect time to develop and ensure that policy is meaningful and deliverable going forward.⁸

Allison Slone is the first active, full-time teacher to serve on the Kentucky Board of Education. She is a special education teacher at McBrayer Elementary School in Rowan County.

NOTES

1 Cited in "Parental Involvement in Education: Research on Parental Involvement, Effects on Parental Involvement, Obstacles to Parental Involvement, Controversies, Current Issues" StateUniversity.com blog, N.d., <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2309/Parental-Involvement-in-Education.html#ixzz6loGlmKA4>.

2 Joyce L. Epstein, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); Anne T. Henderson and Nancy Berla, eds., *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Education, 1994), 14–16.

3 John Hattie, *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008).

4 Joseph B. Cuseo, Aaron Thompson, and Houston M. Barber, *Implementing Innovative Leadership in an Inclusive Learning Environment* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt Publishing, 2020).

5 National PTA, "State Laws on Family Engagement in Education: Reference Guide" (Chicago, IL: National PTA, N.d.), https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/files/d8/State_Laws_Report.pdf.

6 Ibid.

7 Edge Research, "Parents 2020: COVID-19 Closures a Redefining Moment for Students, Parents, and Schools," presentation (Learning Heroes, May 20, 2020) https://r50gh2ss1ic2mww8s3uvjvq1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/LH_2020-Parent-Survey-Partner-1.pdf.

8 Ibid.